

"It is an honor and a privilege to serve the 17th Legislative District. To best serve you, I must hear your thoughts, so please do not hesitate to contact me."

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Standing Committees

- Transportation, ranking Republican;
- Labor, Commerce and Financial Institutions

Special Committees

Legislative
Transportation
Committee,
Vice Chairman

Senator Don Benton



2002 Session

Legislative Report

Dear neighbors:

The 60-day regular session ended at the stroke of midnight on March 14. Although it is good to be home with my family and in the community, I left Olympia with mixed feelings.

Had there been any guarantee we could have worked out the budget difficulties to pass a sustainable budget that did not mortgage the future of our state, I would have preferred to stay in Olympia to work it out. Unfortunately, practical remedies for our state's financial problems were ignored. A sustainable budget was not possible given Olympia's current political climate.

Although unsustainable budget solutions put a dark cloud over this session, I am very proud of some things I was able to accomplish, including increasing limitations on juvenile sex offenders, protecting the patriotic rights of school bus drivers and limiting the creation of new HOV lanes.

Despite the ups and downs brought by the 2002 legislative session, it is always my pleasure to come home and provide you with information about the legislative session.

Sincerely,

Senator Don Benton



As ranking Republican of the Senate Transportation Committee, Senator Benton takes an active role in transportation negotiations and discussions.

HOV Lanes

Many thought HOV lanes would ease traffic congestion and the effects it has had on our region. Unfortunately, HOV lanes have done very little to solve these problems, and have, in many cases, made our problems worse.

If the infrastructure is there to support HOV lanes, they can work. HOV lanes were an admirable effort to reduce traffic congestion, but simply have not worked in Clark County with the current level of infrastructure. We can't go on punishing the commuters for a failed experiment. Now is the time for a fix.

This session, I was successful in gaining approval by the Legislature to limit the creation of new HOV lanes. Future HOV lane projects in Clark County after October of this year will not be allowed until:

- vehicle spaces at park-and-ride lots within the county are two and one-half times the capacity in existence on Jan. 1, 2002; or
- the Interstate 5 bridge over the Columbia River is retrofitted to include four southbound general purpose lanes.



The State Budget

The Legislature should have learned its lesson last year after passing a budget that spent nearly \$700 million more than the state was receiving in revenues. Things only got worse. Soon after session began, a revised revenue forecast put the remainder of the two-year state operating budget \$1.6 billion in the red as revenues dropped sharply.

For the remainder of the 2001-03 biennium, revenues are expected to be \$1.137 billion less than originally anticipated; and costs will be \$328 million higher — mostly because of higher K-12 education enrollments, higher costs and caseloads in Medicaid and corrections, and judgment payouts from lawsuits against the state.

We had a large task at hand in revising the budget with very little of the state's squandered \$1.2 billion "Rainy Day" fund left to bail us out.

The majority's budget plan

The budget makes inappropriate cuts in essential state programs and services; uses significant amounts of "one-time" money from the state's Emergency Reserve Fund; closes some state parks; and increases new revenue by joining other states in "The Big Game" lottery. It also imposes new taxes on direct mail advertising, shipping and out-of-state repair services performed on tangible personal property of Washington consumers.

Even these schemes were not enough to balance the state budget and, with little of the "Rainy Day" fund left, the tobacco settlement money proved to be too tempting for some.

Use of Tobacco Settlement Mortgage Our Future

The state will sell bonds to raise \$425 million by securitizing (or mortgaging) 25 percent of the revenue stream from the national tobacco settlement. State Treasurer Michael Murphy and Attorney General

Budget Facts:

Look where your tax dollars are going!

- The state auditor found that of the 129,119 enrollees in the Basic Health Plan, the state's subsidized health care program, 33,515 people were permitted to remain enrolled without their eligibility ever being verified.
- State spending on miscellaneous goods and services has grown nearly six times the rate of inflation over the last five years.
- Out-of-state travel by state employees has grown more than eight times the rate of inflation over the last five years.
- Since 1990, the number of state employees rose more than 25 percent from 81,000 to 102,000, making state government Washington's largest employer.
- Since 1990, the number of lawsuits filed against the state has grown 49 percent, reaching nearly 4,000 claims in 2001 and costing the state \$109 million in payouts during the last two years.

Christine Gregoire, both Democrats, were vocal in their disapproval of securitizing these funds, saying the state could end up getting as little as 25 cents for every dollar bonded. I believe we will be lucky to get that!

These poor fiscal decisions mortgage the future of our state and set us up for sizeable tax increases. And where does it end? In the future, budget writers could securitize the sales tax for one-time money, or the gas tax, or any revenue stream. This plan is an easy one-time solution instead of making the tough, sustainable budget decisions we were elected to make.

Practical Budget Solutions Ignored for Deficit Spending

When the Legislature adopted a budget last year that spent \$700 million more than expected revenues, Senate Republicans began preparing for the worst. We examined every nook and cranny of the budget looking for possible cuts and ways to create a sustainable budget for the

2003-2005 biennium without a general tax increase, without reliance on increased gambling revenues or stealing nursing home dollars, and without using "one-time" money like the tobacco settlement.

The **RIGHT Approach**, an acronym for the \$1.5 billion in savings options given below, was the result of that hard work:

\$1.5 Billion in Savings Options

- **Reduce** state employment costs (\$258 million)
- **Institute** a "Best Practices" model for the state's rising medical expenditures (\$318 million)
- **Give** agency heads authority to contract out where appropriate (\$100 million)
- **Help** identify efficiencies and non-core services (\$477 million)
- **Take** support costs down to a reasonable level (\$301 million)

Unfortunately, proposals to accomplish these objectives were not given much consideration by the Democratic leadership.

Property Taxes

Property tax is the number one issue of concern when I talk with



friends and neighbors. That is precisely why I have sponsored more than 50 property tax

reform bills since my election to the Legislature in 1994.

In the past two sessions, I have introduced five property tax reform measures:

- **SB 5160** – Phases out the state portion of property taxes by 2009. Currently the state portion of property taxes is \$3.60 per every \$1,000 of assessed property value. This would reduce your current property tax bill by approximately 27 percent.
- **SB 5161** – Limits increases in property taxes to the lesser of 2 percent per year or inflation.
- **SB 5165** – Freezes assessed property values at the 1998 level or the purchase price, whichever occurs last. Property values would only be reassessed when a title transfer occurs.
- **SB 5807** – Places the burden of proof on the assessor during property tax appeals if the increase in valuation exceeds 2 percent per year.
- **SJR 8205** - Amends the state constitution to allow individual property taxes to be frozen at a level consistent with the purchase price.

Throughout my eight years in the Legislature, my top goal for the citizens of the 17th District and throughout Washington state has been to reduce and restrain the ever-growing and unfair burden placed upon property owners. Rest assured, I will continue that fight.

Capital Budget Could Create New Jobs

The capital budget projects list is expected to create 1,800 new private sector jobs statewide and save about 2,700 jobs from the chopping block. Projects include building, repairing or improving state-owned buildings, community college facilities, public schools, and public parks.



The budget devotes \$17 million to the Columbia River deepening project. As you may know, the Columbia River has lost business to deeper river

thoroughfares that can accommodate larger ships.

Currently, the Columbia is three feet too shallow for the large-scale ships. This project will deepen the river by three feet, encouraging those ships to come to our ports.

Projects in our area for Clark College, Lower Columbia Community College and the Department of Fish and Wildlife were also funded.



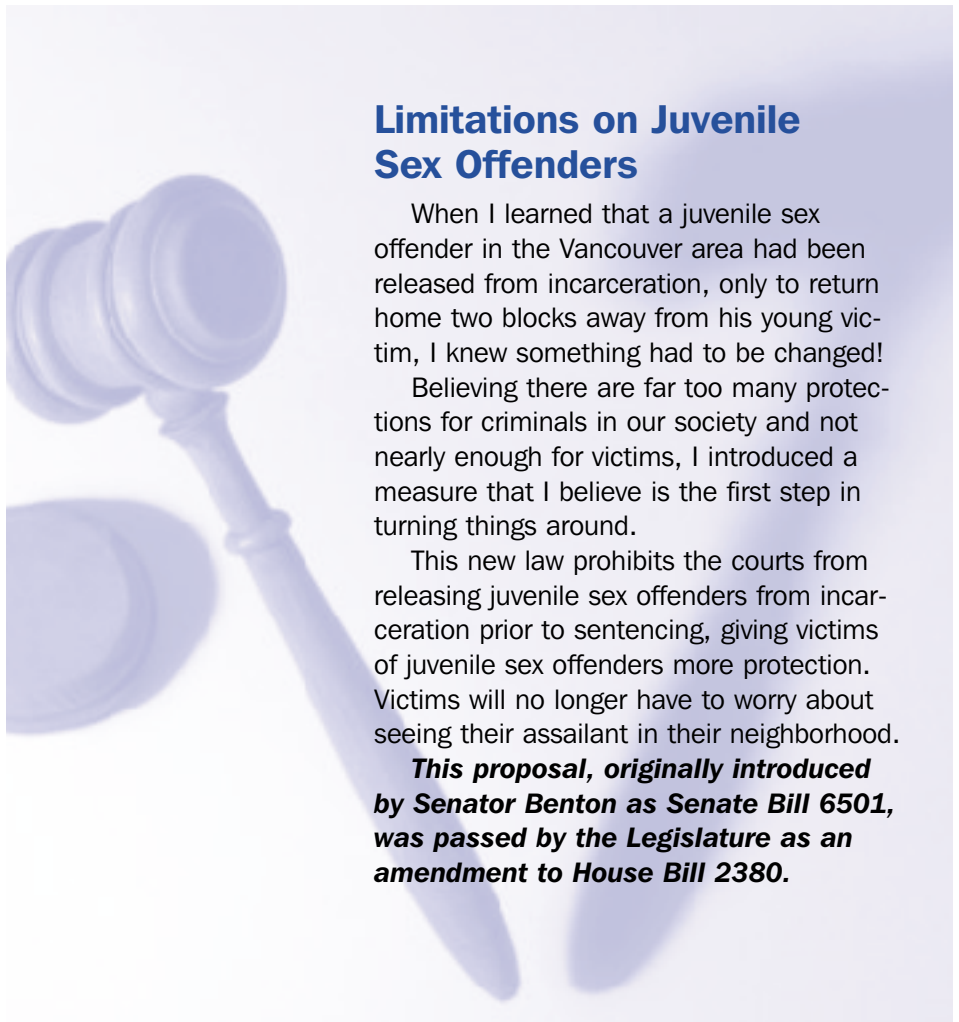
Limitations on Juvenile Sex Offenders

When I learned that a juvenile sex offender in the Vancouver area had been released from incarceration, only to return home two blocks away from his young victim, I knew something had to be changed!

Believing there are far too many protections for criminals in our society and not nearly enough for victims, I introduced a measure that I believe is the first step in turning things around.

This new law prohibits the courts from releasing juvenile sex offenders from incarceration prior to sentencing, giving victims of juvenile sex offenders more protection. Victims will no longer have to worry about seeing their assailant in their neighborhood.

This proposal, originally introduced by Senator Benton as Senate Bill 6501, was passed by the Legislature as an amendment to House Bill 2380.





Legislative Report

U.S. Flags on School Buses

Since September 11, it has become more important than ever for many people to demonstrate their patriotism, whether it is by buying and listening to patriotic music, or proudly displaying the U.S. flag.

Initially, there was some confusion as to whether or not our local school bus drivers were allowed to display the U.S. flag on their buses. I felt strongly that they should not be deprived of that right.

Before session, I promised them I would clear up the confusion. I made good on that promise with Senate Bill 6389. The new law requires the Office of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction to change its rules to allow school bus drivers to display the U.S. flag on their buses.



Senator Benton and Dan Laxson, a bus driver for special needs students, proudly display the U.S. flag at the Evergreen School District bus barn.